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THE SUBSTANCE OF POETRY

Perhaps the formulation of a statement that shall distinguish the substance of poetry from the substance of other kinds of art plunges the formulator into the most precarious of mental exercises. It has been tried by a great many adventurous spirits, but by no one with so much success as to close the question. The demonstration of the equality of the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle with the sum of the squares on the other two sides remains unchallenged. No one offers to present a truer statement of the relations subsisting between these areas. It is not a matter of the variations of our human psychology. Poetry is something different in the very circumstance that its measure is not the fact of the outer world, but the inner evaluation of it by the individual man. It is as unstable as truth, and wiser men than Pontius Pilate have felt truth slipping under their feet or vanishing like a wraith into the clouds.

The question of the objective and the subjective and their relative place in the final art product is always a difficult one, but it is peculiarly so in poetry. How much shall the poet look in at himself, and how much outward at the world. How far may he go toward sentimentalism? How must he keep step with that prosaic, dull-eyed fellow-traveler, dusty old Matter of Fact? What are the actualities of which we must be most mindful in poetry, and how much may we give ourselves up to dreams? These questions are the more important because among the uninitiate,—both those informed of their condition and the sweetly unconscious,—sentimentalism and dreams are the conventional material of verse.

Shelley said that "poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best men." Definitions of that sort are pretty and alluring. They go not a little way toward disarming criticism, but both historically and psychologically they are inexact and unscientific. By that test Tom Moore might be made to appear a greater poet than Dante. Taking advantage of that mode of judgment, the placid and fortunate Longfellow might sing the "Psalm of Life" so tri-

umphantly that we should never hear the eternal "Nevermore" of Poe's "Raven."

Anything like a decisive judgment in so delicate a matter must seek a surer basis in the elemental stuff that distinguishes poetry from music and painting, disregarding sculpture and architecture as being more remote, and leaving prose literature for the time at one side. The business of music is very obviously with sound, and it is with sounds in themselves as having independently a satisfying quality. Music is a presentative, not a re-presentative art. There is such a thing as descriptive music, so called, but that, for reasons that would detain us too long, is not legitimate music. It is properly noise added to music. One thing that is perfectly obvious and that yet is sometimes deliberately ignored should be kept carefully in mind. The symbols of music are sounds that address themselves to the sense of hearing alone. They are not symbols of ideas. Separately or collectively or in series, as musical sounds, they have no meaning in the sense that they convey ideas, and can have none.

The painter works quite as obviously with form and color. It is the quality of some arrangement of forms and colors that he may properly put before us. At first glance this may seem no more than a transference from one sense to another, from hearing to sight. It is that; but there is in it also a deeper significance. It is a change from a presentative art to a re-presentative. Making the sound of the snorting of a horse on a musical instrument is not making music, no matter how perfect the representation. Putting a snorting horse on canvas for the eyes may be great painting, as anyone who has stood before Rosa Bonheur's wonderful picture at the Metropolitan Museum knows very well. The difference seems to be partly in the fact that no sound as mere imitation can sufficiently embody and symbolize for us the whole of the thing for which it may be meant to stand. Sound as a symbol seems never able to rise above the trivial or grotesque. In this character it cannot give the feeling of qualities at all as high as those with which it can affect us as pure sound.

It is the part of painting, then, to give pleasure by its material, form, and color, as material alone, and then beyond that

to give pleasure further by the quality of the things that have form and color,—man in his variety, the lower animate world in its multiplicity, the inanimate world in its vastness. It has within its scope a place for the limited expression of ideas, the partial representation of life. In comparison with literature, however, it can do this but incompletely, because it does not have a real language. Human speech has been arbitrarily shaped by man for the purpose of communicating his ideas. It is the only instrument that has been so shaped, the only instrument at all adequate to that end, and the art of literature is conditioned by the fact that its medium is a thought medium, just as the other arts are sense mediums and not thought mediums. Being so conditioned, literature, and as a part of literature, poetry, has ideas as its subject-matter, primarily ideas about life.

When you are told that there is more truth than poetry in something that you have just said, you accept the assurance as a compliment on the basis of a common error about poetry. To a very great number of persons, doubtless, poetry is reason taking holiday and giving itself up to the guidance of an imagination running riot in defiance of all the actualities. The trouble with this understanding is that, while it is not true, it has a touch of something so much like truth that the wayfaring man has a good chance of missing the straight road. That possibility of error lies close to the distinction between prose and poetry. If all literature is a criticism of life, as Matthew Arnold has told us truly enough, poetry is the more imaginative part of that criticism. It is life so seen and understood that it communicates a higher thrill, its quality so felt that it more completely detaches itself from its material embodiment and becomes a fine joy.

There is a story told of a little girl whose mother found her in the bath-room with her clothes very much bedraggled. Her explanation of her condition was: "I've been trying to walk on the water, but I want to tell you it's no fool's job." The adventurous youngster's problem is the problem of poetry. It must walk on the water. It must be supported by something within itself, in seeming, something that is not the solid earth of plain prose upon which even the hero of Moliere's comedy is

delighted to find that he has always walked securely, and yet it must support itself as certainly as prose. The casual observer simply thinks that it does not support itself. He sees it as purposeless unreality tossing itself in the wind. It is a boy's kite held by a thread that may snap at any moment. To look up at it and see the tail wiggling and curling in the wind is pleasant, but, even though Franklin did use a kite to bring the lightning down to earth, it is worth no more than such a casual glance. Boys may enjoy it and the mothers of boys watching them at their play, but it is all only play.

There is some truth in this, because a great deal of what takes itself for poetry is only the flimsy play of a slack-rope walker's skirts. These are not very important in themselves, and they have very little relation to the current modes in dress. Moreover, their flutterings are most insubstantially supported in the air. It is only by incessant motion of some sort that the wearer of them keeps herself poised on the rope. Instability is the first word and the last word of her passage from one end of the rope to the other. It is only a show and a spectacle, and when all the tricks of balancing have been exhibited, the skirts and the wearer of them and the ropes and the supports that hold the ropes vanish, and nothing has been changed from what it was before. It is illusion and phantasmagoria that has passed, not an enduring verity, not even a symbol of the things that were and are and shall be.

There is an art of walking on the water. The child in the bath-room had not learned it and was not in a position to practise it. The technique of that art, however, is not especially recondite. Perhaps one may call the matter simple. Freeze the water. If it is not too shallow, only a crust of ice on top will be necessary. Connection with the solid fact of rock and sand and mud that make the earth will still be fluid, but it will be secure. Your feet will not be in the mire. They will also not be treading the clouds. At the same time, the mire will help to bear them up, and what supports them most immediately has been and again may be cloud.

All this is an attempt to distinguish between the fancy and the imagination. There are two words, fantasy and fancy, the rela-

tion between which is not sufficiently understood. They come from the same root, and a fantasy is only a little more unreal than a fancy. They are both more or less unregulated and undisciplined, more or less creatures of the slack-rope and the spangles, impatient of obedience to any laws, whether of nature or human nature, of reason or measure or good taste. Imagination is rooted etymologically and psychologically in the image, not the visual image especially, but images of all kinds, the first elements and groundwork of thought that the senses pour into the brain. Imagination is the rekindling of these, in the first forms and new combinations, but always in accordance with their characters and natures, in agreement with the laws of actuality by which they exist and have a place in the mind. Imagination is the higher faculty, because it creates, not caprices and wanton nothings, but existences that are firmly set in a real world, born of its laws and revealing its quality, not necessarily recording its fact, but not denying it, walking the water, not as a miracle of triumph over the nature of water, but as an achievement through knowledge of its various manifestations.

The highest reality which can concern us and which can enter largely into human thought and speech is man beating out his destiny in his world. Life as man lives it is the great subject of poetry, and poetry is to be distinguished from prose on the one side and from vaporings that are not poetry on the other by the degree in which it carries itself above the loose débris of matter of fact and refuses to don the antic robes of harlequin and follow vagrant fancy. It is seeing true and seeing far and feeling the quality of what he sees intensely that makes the poet. His first gift is imagination, imagination that knows the big for big and the little for little, that is not tricked by the trivial, that is not awed by the merely voluminous, that determines value and quality justly with a clear eye for the larger issues of life.

Shifting as are the boundaries between music and painting and literature, and between poetry and prose as literary forms, we may none the less locate approximately the points at which one passes into another and becomes distinct from that other. Music is primarily the art of sound, and of sound such as creates a mood. That effect is dependent upon the play of the sound

on the senses, and not upon intellectual recognitions. The sound itself, or more properly the succession of sounds, may be something before unknown to the hearer, something freshly presented and so presented as without relation to anything previously in the hearer's experience. It has no direct relation to life, except as in a particular hearer it may arouse memories that have been a part of experience and so a part of life. This connotation of music, if the memory revived by it may be so called, must vary with the hearer. It comes from the listener himself, and not from the music. Since the re-presentative part of the experience does not come from the music, it follows that the music is presentative, that is, it presents sounds and does not represent life. It has only a loose contact with life in the circumstance that one who has been excited by music is by so much the more alive and by so much the more lets his faculties flow out toward life. This kindling of his feelings may make him transfer the sense of a new influx of life to the music, as if it were a part of its substance. That is a natural error, but it is error. The substance of music is sound, and not life. It presents tone for its own sake as something interesting and beautiful in itself, and not as something representing life.

Painting seems obviously nearer to life, because it represents things that are a part of life, animate and inanimate, with a very much greater approach to totality. Form and color body forth the thing itself more completely than sound, and they certify to a correspondence between inner reality and outer reality such as cannot come within the compass of music. Painting, then, as a representative art, has certain aspects of life as its subject-matter. Because it is a representative art and because at the same time it can represent certain aspects of life only, it has an upper and a lower limitation, that is, a limitation in its movement toward the representation of life and a limit in its return to the presentation of form and color as its elementary material. A painting should not tell a story, because painting is an art of the stationary. It brings things before the mind as they are at a given moment, and it is only by some trick like that of the cartoonist's label that it can be made to look before and after. It is then something outside the picture that the observer in part

enjoys, something for which the painting itself is only a kind of symbol. It so becomes a partial hieroglyphic, a step on the road to the art of letters, but by so much the less a work of art in itself, because it is by so much the more a part of the mechanic process of another art.

On the other hand, since it is an art of representation and may put before us the show of life itself, even though it be in its most fleeting moments, it should not be satisfied with the presentation of form and color for their own sakes. It is the function of music so to confine itself to the sense symbol, the sense appeal. It is not the function of painting.

As form and color are but the superficial dress of painting, and not its real subject-matter, so melody and movement and imagery giving warmth to the shapes and hues of reality are but the more readily realized appearances of poetry. Its more intimate substance is life in all its semblances. Ideally it is the life of man in his higher moments, man as a creature of desires and impulses, but also as a creature of ideas and purposes and a moving throng of fancies and imaginations capturing the will. It is life in its highest reaches that makes poetry, not the life of the caterpillar, but the life of a being of a higher sentience capable of thrilling in the rush of his experiences. The flower in the crannied wall may be the starting point of that sweep of passion, but it is not the passion of poetry until the flower has become so deeply a part of man's world that it is in its measure the arbiter of his destinies. Here we have representative art at its fullest, endowed with symbols for bringing before us the all of life. As literature it must not stay in its symbols. It must not halt before the image, but point us to its inner reality. All life is its province, but it is thinking too lightly of human nature to expect man to thrill over isolated and trivial phenomena seen apart from their dependencies.

For poetry, as distinct from prose, the thrill is very much a necessity. That is the justification for Milton's dictum that poetry should be "simple, sensuous, and passionate." Prose may be good prose without meeting any of these requirements, but poetry must give its lightest utterance some tremor of response to the ultimate joy and sorrow of the world. The shadow

passing across the sun is neither gloom nor beauty till man has thought of it as changing, not *a* sky but *his* sky. So it is that poetry centres in man as a being making sentience out of his senses. So it is that poetry is intensely the life of mind, bringing together the near and the far, reading the symbol as the symbol and then looking beyond it to the thing symbolized, to the more enduring verities, through the flower to the recurrent spring and the seed dropping to the mellow autumn mould under the leaves.

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